

The Promise of Comfort
Isaiah 40:1-5
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Well, the sanctuary looks a bit different this week, doesn't it? I love the season of Advent for so many reasons, but one of them is having the sanctuary adorned with wreaths and bows and trees. No matter how the last week has gone, walking in here on Sunday morning reminds me that something is different and we have entered into a season that will culminate with the birth of Jesus.

But that's a long time from now. I know it's only four weeks away, but it seems like a month! And we have no choice but to wait. In a culture where people yell at the microwave to hurry up, waiting for anything doesn't feel like an inconvenience, it feels like a hardship. We're not good at waiting.

I have a lot of experience waiting. When I lived in Chicago, I used to drive 21 miles every day to work. Sometimes it felt like it took me four weeks to get there! I was told when we moved to Chicago that there are only two seasons there: winter and construction season. I would agree with that and would argue that seasons come and go, but construction is a way of life. Since I had no choice but to wait, I tried to turn this negative into a positive by creating a game I liked to call, "Will the lane I choose be closed today?" If I lose, I have to sit in traffic. If I win, I have to sit in traffic.

In our passage from Isaiah today, the prophet is also talking about doing some road construction. Did you catch that? "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."

To understand the importance of this road construction, we have to understand the road the Israelites have traveled thus far. The Israelites were in need of a smooth highway because their journey to this point had been filled with potholes and detours. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, they were finally living in the Promised Land that God have given them. God kept God's end of the covenant, but the Israelites weren't keeping up their end. They were doing things that God had told them specifically not to do, like being greedy and worshipping idols.

So God is forced to carry out the punishment God told the Israelites would happen. God says in Isaiah, "The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD." That's exactly what happened. The Babylonians swept into the Promised Land, ransacked Jerusalem, and sent the Israelites into exile back in Babylon. There they waited and waited and waited for God to rescue them and deliver them back to their homeland.

After years in exile, my guess is the Israelites are beginning to wonder if God has forgotten them. They're asking the question that we may have asked at one time or another, and may be asking now: Can God really get me through this mess? Where is God in the midst of this difficult time? We have all had times of spiritual exile, times when our faith felt barren, times when we were living in the wilderness, waiting for a voice to cry out.

I'm not sure what you are waiting for as we enter Advent, but I can bet that most of us, if not all of us, are waiting for something. Maybe you're waiting for a relationship to sprout new life out of dry ground or waiting for doctors to give you the answers you want. Maybe you're waiting for things to return to normal or for there to be no more reasons to be fearful. Or maybe you are just waiting for something different, for the tiniest in-breaking of God into our world, that glimpse that reminds us, in the midst of our tiresome travels, that God is indeed with us. God, ARE you with us?

For those of us who are waiting, Isaiah speaks a word of comfort to us. This passage is not about Israel's unreliability; it's about God's reliability. It's about how our unfaithfulness cannot nullify God's faithfulness. It's about how God can overcome our past and present circumstances to bring hope to our future. Remember the Israelites. They trampled on God's law, snubbed their nose in the face of God's goodness, ran roughshod over God's covenant, and yet God says, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for."

And now, the Israelites are preparing to journey back to their homeland, but they have to go through the desert to get there. Similarly, as we trek through Advent, there may be rough terrain for us to traverse. We may have to just sit and wait and as Tom Petty sang, "The waiting is the hardest part." We need Jesus to come into our world now more than ever. Sometimes the hope that Advent promises makes the waiting that much harder. Do we HAVE to wait for Christmas to experience the new life Christ offers? We want it now! But the waiting is instrumental, because it gives us time to get ready. Here's the good news: As we wait, God is preparing a way.

Some of you may remember this, but I can't imagine what this country was like without interstates. Can you even fathom driving long distances on two-lane roads full of switchbacks and narrow bridges? But, thanks to the ingenuity of engineers, we were able to blast through mountains and lift up valleys to make an easier way to get from one place to another. And then, the construction started. Maybe interstates weren't such a good idea after all.

That's what Isaiah is saying God does in our lives. God takes the hills and valleys, the rough spots and rugged places, and God finds a way through them. It may require some construction, maybe even a little spiritual dynamite to blast us out of our complacency, but God will find a way through. Whatever lies in front of us, whether it's a pothole or a speed bump or a mountain, our trust in God will help us through.

We need a way through because life seems so much right now. Every spare moment gets taken up by something to do or something to worry about. It feels like every time I'm going to have a little down time, something comes along to take up that space. There's actually a law for that. It's called Parkinson's Law and it states that work will expand to fill the time available for its completion. In other words, whatever free time you think have to get something done will be filled up with 20 other things. Parkinson's Law says when you have space to fill, there will be work to fill it.

Today, I want to propose a similar law. Let's call it the Advent Law, and it goes like this: Hope will expand to fill the space made available in our hearts. If we only have a little room for hope, then that's all the hope Christmas will bring to us. But if we open our hearts and expand our capacity for hope, even or especially in the face of our own mountains, then hope will flood in, submerging us in love and grace and the belief that through Christ, God will make a way. Do you have hope today?

Isaiah writes a little later, “The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.” The hope of Advent is that, as we wait in our deserts and try to scale our mountains, we will see God there, working with us to make a way through. What is taking up space in your heart today, keeping hope from coming in? What keeps you up at night? What fear has gained a foothold? No matter what challenges may lie ahead, Christ is coming this Christmas, the in-breaking of God into our world, the glimpse that reminds us that Jesus is indeed Emmanuel, “God with us.” That is a word of comfort we all need to hear.

But that doesn’t mean we should be comfortable. That word has taken on a different meaning in our culture than what was originally intended. Today, it means “physical relaxed and free from constraint,” but the origins of the word tells us a different story. The word “comfort” comes from two root words: “com,” which means “with,” and “fort” which means “strength. So, for God to provide us with comfort means that God gives us the strength to face whatever is in front of us. Rather than being relaxed and at ease, God’s comfort fortifies us, bolstering us, building a spiritual bulwark around our hearts. To be comforted by God means that we are given the strength we need to wait through even the most difficult times.

But for that comfort to take hold, we have to believe in it, to believe that God will be with us as we wait. We can choose to wait with despair or with negativity, and we can let those feelings darken our hearts. We can wait with distraction, letting the trappings of this season take our focus away from the intentionality of waiting, of keeping our eyes open for God with us. Or we can wait with hope and let the light of God fill us this Christmas. I don’t know what you need this Christmas, but I trust Christ will provide even more than you could dream of. A new start. A different perspective. A reminder of grace. A peace which passes all understanding. Christ is coming, and he is bringing us a new way of living, a new road to travel. Comfort, comfort my people. “Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken!” So take comfort.